



## Hunters wary of Rockies drilling

Some don't oppose boom but want wildlife protected for long run

By Judith Kohler

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RIFLE, Colo. - Outfitter Jeff Mead feels a lot more comfortable with his feet in a set of stirrups, steering his horse into the rugged Colorado forest, than on an airplane 11,000 feet over his stomping grounds.

Mead soon forgot his unease during a recent tour over his backcountry haven as he pointed to the natural gas wells springing up across the land where he has taken hunters for 15 years.

"Elk and deer move out when rigs move in," said Mead, a lanky, mustachioed 50-year-old. "Up on the mountain during hunting season, if you sneeze, you can hear the elk running. So, don't tell me they like eating by a drilling rig."

The debate over what energy development is doing to wildlife is raging throughout the Rockies, where some of the nation's richest gas deposits lie under prime wildlife habitat.

The Rocky Mountain West has seen more than 50 years of oil and gas development, but the activity has skyrocketed in recent years. But some wonder about the long-term fallout on recreation, tourism and hunting — all of which sustained parts of western Colorado after the energy industry bust in the early 1980s.

"Every industry has a life span. At some point in time, this will be over and we want to remain here," Rifle Mayor Keith Lambert said.

### 'Interesting times' ahead

Ron Velarde, the Colorado Division of Wildlife's northwest regional manager, said it is important to look at the whole picture.

"I think it's going to be some interesting times, between gas development, the possibility of oil shale and coal-bed methane, right in the middle of the wildlife mecca of the state of Colorado," Velarde said. "I think that we all better be paying attention."

Mead's outfitting business has already taken a hit. He usually has 40 hunters signed up by now for fall trips, but has only 18 people lined up so far this year. He blames the drilling, which he said has decreased the number of elk, deer and bear in certain areas.

Velarde believes it's vital to research the cumulative impact of energy development on wildlife and he sees energy companies and environmental groups as likely partners.

Wyoming is ahead of Colorado both in the level of energy development and studying how it affects wildlife. Still, so much is unknown, said Hall Sawyer, a biologist with Western EcoSystems Technology Inc. in Cheyenne, Wyo.

A study by the consulting firm begun in 1998 and funded largely by the gas industry has found changes in the movement of mule deer as drilling has increased in their winter range in western Wyoming. Sawyer and his colleagues are still studying what that may mean for the animals in the long term.

Industry has gotten involved, too: Williams Production and EnCana Oil and Gas USA have teamed up with Colorado on wildlife studies and both documented through photographs and videos the flocks of wild turkeys and groups of deer and elk near their wells.

### Pro-drilling ... and well being

Bob Elderkin, an avid hunter and retired Bureau of Land Management employee, scoffs at pictures of elk near

wells as proof that wildlife isn't being harmed.

"If you look at that herd of elk, every elk is standing. Nobody's lying down, every one of them has his ears up and they're on full alert," Elderkin said.

He tramps up and down the sagebrush-dotted hillsides near his Silt home and along stream banks, where he said he has found well sites that should been cleaned up by now or replanted grasses and plants that are poor choices for area wildlife. Elderkin said the BLM has the authority to demand better of companies.

"I think there's this notion that we don't want drilling, that we're anti-industry, but that's not the case at all," Elderkin said. "We want you to be able to get the gas. We know it's happening, but let's figure out a way that we can still have some well being after you're out of here."

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